

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-25

NEW YORK TIMES
10 SEPTEMBER 1976

The Poets And Kings Depart

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Sept. 9—In early 1975, when Mao Tse-tung was already drifting into the shadows of his final "Long March," he wrote a poem to his political and military comrade, Prime Minister Chou En-lai:

*Loyal parents who sacrificed so
much for the nation
Never feared the ultimate fate.
Now that the country has become
red, who will be its guardian?
Our mission unfinished may take
a thousand years.
The struggle tires us and our hair
is grey.
You and I, old friends, can we just
watch our efforts be washed
away?*

So even Chairman Mao knew that the weakness of greatness is the fragility of life and wondered what would happen to China when he was gone. He counted on Chou En-lai to succeed him for a time, and Chou struggled at the end to arrange an orderly succession through Prime Minister Teng Hsiao-p'ing, but Mr. Chou died and Mr. Teng was banished even before Chairman Mao was gone.

Accordingly, it is a presumption, and in the eyes of a grieving China probably an impertinence to speculate on Mao's "successor." The chances are there will be no successor, for Mao had become a myth, which could be even stronger in death than in life; but the world still wonders who will rule a fifth of the human race.

The Government in Peking, whoever they are, has chosen four men to preside over the ceremony of burial, and since the Chinese, more than most, live and die by symbols, these four, set apart from the rest, have attracted

special attention from the China watchers in the political and academic communities of the United States.

They are Hua Kuo-feng, vice chairman of the Communist Party, and Prime Minister of the State Council; Wang Hung-wen, another vice chairman and the young fortyish secretary of the Shanghai Communist Party; Chang Ch'un-chiao, head of the political arm of the Chinese armed forces; and Yeh Chien-ying, the Minister of National Defense, now in his late seventies.

Officials here also pay attention to a fifth key figure in the Chinese hierarchy: Ch'en Hsi-lien, also a vice premier of the State Council, and more important, present military commander of the armed forces in the Peking region, protecting and commanding the capital.

The informed guess here—and it is no more than that—is that it will be a while before anybody emerges as Chairman of the party, and that maybe the political leadership will be collective rather than personal for a very long time.

Meanwhile, speculation is centered here on command of the Chinese armed forces, and whether this will go for the time being to the old man who has prestige, Yeh Chien-ying, present Minister of Defense, or to Ch'en Hsi-lien, who commands around Peking.

Beyond this, Washington is more interested in the philosophy of China after Mao Tse-tung than in its personalities. Does it want to cooperate in a new and more just order of the world? Does it still see itself as the independent, isolated "middle kingdom," or does it want to trade with the world and become a new modern empire in a cooperative, interdependent world by the end of the century?

This is what Washington, after paying its tributes to the personal achievements of Mao Tse-tung, would like to know. The internal struggles for power in China are important to this question. The last three United States representatives in Peking since the opening to China—David Bruce, George Bush, now head of the C.I.A., and Thomas Gates—have tried to find out, but they have been isolated and frustrated, smothered by politeness but deprived of information.

They have all been consulted since the death of Chairman Mao about "whiter China," but they do not know, so the Government here is waiting and watching.

It has to know what men and politics will emerge in China after the "succession." Will Peking follow the line of the Shanghai Communiqué, cooperating with Washington on at least limited terms? Will it become more nationalistic after Mao, and compromise its differences with Moscow? Or—and this is the anxiety here—will new Chinese leaders try to put together the Sino-Soviet alliance and confront the free world with a solid Communist bloc in the Eurasian continent from Vladivostok to Berlin?

The captains, the poets and the kings depart in the Western world, without much change, but in the Communist world, there are often fundamental changes from a Lenin to a Stalin, from a Stalin to a Khrushchev. Washington wonders about this after Chairman Mao, mainly because it is guessing in the dark. Its guess for the moment is that the policies of Chairman Mao and Chou En-lai will prevail for a while, at least until the struggle for succession is over.

Meanwhile, the balance of political power in the world will be in doubt, for nobody in the main power centers of the world knows who or what's coming next.